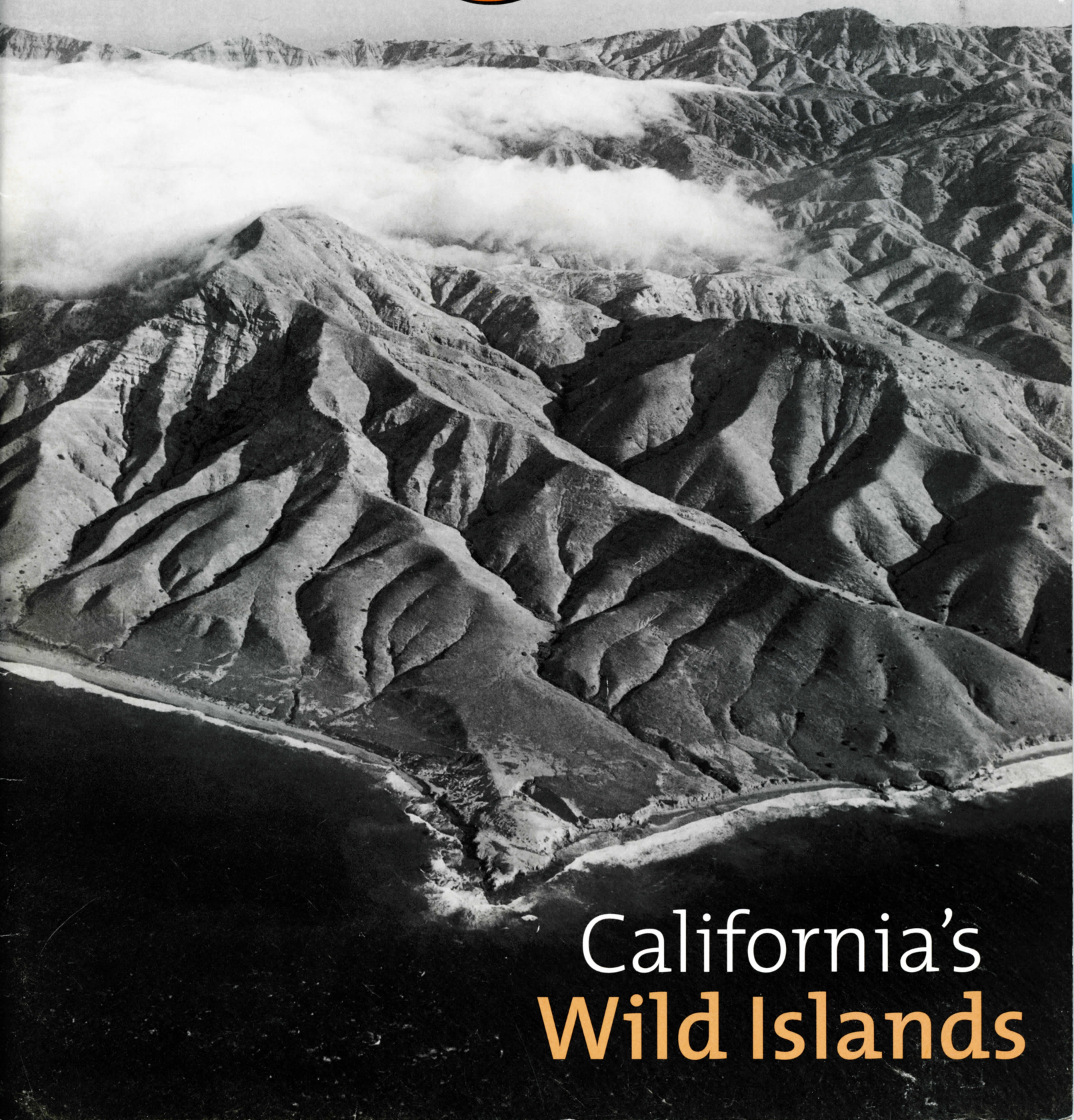


C A L I F O R N I A  
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California's  
Wild Islands



# Not As Remote As They Seem

SARA WAN



*Early one cold and dreary morning in July, we made our way to Sausalito Harbor to board the 42-foot cabin cruiser *Kumbaya* for a run to the Farallon Islands. The purpose of the trip was to deliver supplies to a handful of biologists from the Point Reyes Bird Observatory (PRBO), the only humans on the rocky islands, some 25 miles off San Francisco.*

The boat left the dock and headed beyond the Golden Gate under an overcast sky. The famous bridge, brilliant red on post cards, loomed muddy brown before us. It seemed a "star gate" through which we would pass from man's world of concrete and commerce to an island realm of nature.

The feeling that we were moving into a different world was enhanced as the fog closed the curtain on the cluttered San Francisco shoreline, and we entered a mist-shrouded abyss of huge swells churned by 25-knot winds.

The Farallones would not be visible for some time. We imagined them as they once were, rich in pelagic life, with thousands of northern fur seals, returned from unknown points of the ocean, lounging on the rocks. Overhead would be a spectacular skydiving display by thousands of murres, puffins, auklets, and storm petrels. The birds would plunge again and again into the bountiful sea, then fly back to rookeries on every ledge with beaks full of shiny silvery fish.

When at last the island pierced the fog,



TOP: U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE; BOTTOM: POINT REYES BIRD OBSERVATORY



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our illusions were shattered. There was no symphony of barking seals, no avian spectacle. The first object we saw was a tall cargo crane that held the "Billy Pugh," a rubber doughnut rigged with ropes which lifts humans and supplies from the sea to the land—the only way onto the island. You step into a Boston whaler, then onto the Billy Pugh. As we held on to the ropes and swung over crashing surf to the cliff we wondered how any place so difficult to reach could be affected by man. Since 1968 these islands have been protected by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) as the Farallon Islands National Wildlife Refuge, and biologists from PRBO, under cooperative agreement with the USFWS, monitor and safeguard the wildlife. Kyra Mills and two student interns were in temporary residence, conducting studies.

Exploitation of the Farallones began in 1579 when they were discovered by Sir Frances Drake. And as we stepped ashore,

we were quickly confronted with man's lasting and continuing influence.

Walking along a concrete path toward the two buildings—built in the 1870s and left behind by the Coast Guard—we saw many dead or dying gulls. Mills, the island's resident biologist, said that they had contracted botulism from unknown sources, either from garbage dumps on the mainland, or from water-borne pathogens.

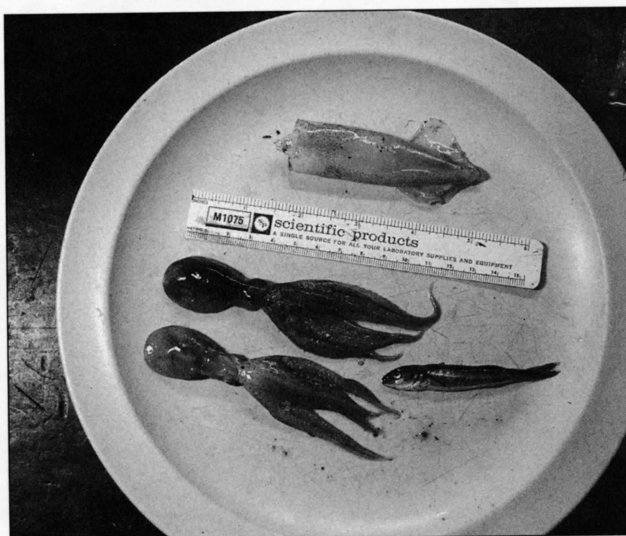
Mills and her team were checking on young auklets and pigeon guillemots in pipes and boxes that had been strategically placed to serve as artificial nesting sites—an effort to aid in monitoring the species. The interns lifted nestlings gently from the pipes, weighed them, and returned them. This was part of a daily routine to monitor the chicks' development. I asked about the current status of the various species I had expected to see here. Some were out fishing, but it was apparent that population numbers had dropped drastically.

**Top left:** Looking southeast toward the South Farallons

**Bottom left:** Eggers lowered themselves over cliffs on ropes, then filled their flour-sack shirts with up to 20 dozen murre eggs at a time. (19th century)

**Above:** An elephant seal turns its back on the old Coast Guard buildings.





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LARRY WAN

Top left: A plate of gourmet treats for a rhinoceros auklet (below left)—small fish, squid, and octopus.

Top right: Weighing a rhinoceros auklet

Below right: Western gulls with their well-camouflaged chick



POINT REYES BIRD OBSERVATORY



LARRY WAN

Before the mid-1800s, when Russian fur traders brought Aleuts as slaves to hunt fur seals, these islands are believed to have harbored some 50,000 northern fur seals, at least one million murres, 7,000 puffins, thousands of double-crested cormorants, and various other seabirds for which we do not have estimates. The fur seals were destroyed. Puffin, cormorant, and murre populations were reduced to one-tenth of mid-1800s' populations.

Where, I asked, were the ashy storm petrels? I had never seen one and particularly wanted to. I was told that the adults were out, but there was one chick inside a crevice in the wall of a supply shed. So we walked over and tried to view it. What had happened to the ashys? Apparently their numbers continue to decline. Why? Mills responded that western gulls had expanded into ashy nesting habitat: crevices on steep slopes. But what was causing the gull population to expand into this area? Were human activities a cause? She said that scientists did not really think so, that the gulls had been moving up into the hills ever since the Coast Guard left the islands. However, as I contin-

ued to ask questions of Mills and, later, of Willaim J. Sydeman, director of marine studies at the Point Reyes Bird Observatory, I discovered that man was indeed the underlying cause.

To understand just what was going on, we must go back in time. Before the fur traders' arrival, said Sydeman, "the whole marine terrace and parts of the hillsides were covered with fur seals. They made the habitat unavailable to gulls." After the seals had been destroyed, murres took over the hills, keeping the gulls off. During the Gold Rush murres were hunted and their eggs were collected and sold, until few murres remained on the Farallones. The gulls then seized their opportunity. When the Coast Guard took up residence, they smashed gull eggs to keep gull numbers down and off the hillsides.

Now the Coast Guard is gone, and "the murre population has risen to about 70,000—still a far cry from one million," said Joelle Buffa, refuge manager at the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge.



Human activities continue to ravage murre populations. "The most significant problem facing seabirds in California waters, in my view, is oil pollution," said Sydeman. "At least 20,000 murres were killed by oil in the last three or four years." Additionally, each year thousands of murres are killed in California by entanglement in gill nets. As a result of the continuing depression of the murre population, gulls have moved into former murre nesting grounds in the hills and are preying on petrels. "They prey on both adults and chicks, but it's the predation on adults that keeps the petrel population down," said Sydeman. In addition, mice (introduced to the island) sometimes prey on the chicks. (Ashy storm petrels are only eight inches long, and their newly hatched young are barely bigger than a golf ball.) Scientists from PRBO and USFWS have made major and heroic efforts to encourage the various species to recolonize the Farallones, but human impacts, both local and global, continue to keep these species in jeopardy.

An overall decrease in fish stocks keeps down the populations of all seabirds. Global

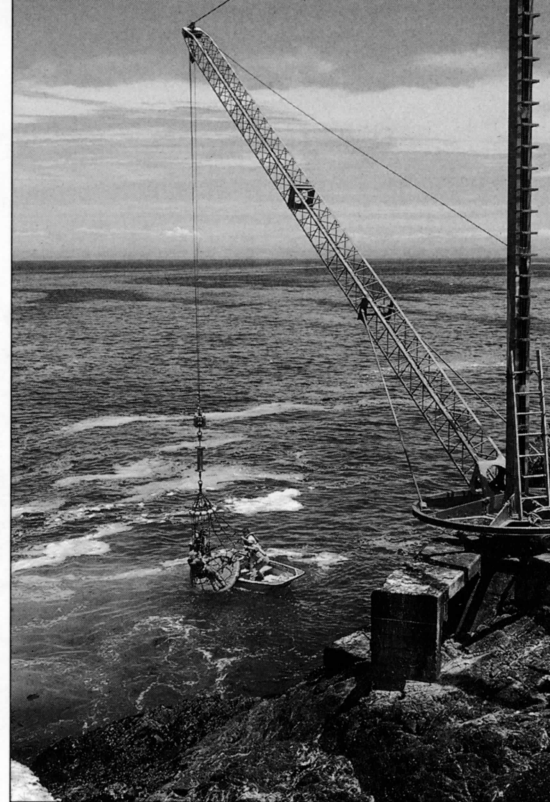
climate change and altering sea conditions impact fish stocks. Overfishing diminishes the food supply. Many birds feed on small "bait" fish, including anchovies and sardines, which are increasingly being harvested for salmon aquaculture and other uses. Pollution and oil spills poison the waters; low-flying aircraft and boats come too close to the islands during the nesting season, and flush birds off their nests, making it easier for predators to take chicks. In short, while the work of the USFWS and PRBO is essential, full recovery and restoration cannot be expected. Restoration efforts can lead to a sustainable and viable future, but the past will never return. Whatever the future holds, wildlife will undoubtedly be less abundant and less diverse.

If I learned nothing else that morning, it was that no place on this planet is immune to the impacts of those who view natural resources as assets to be liquidated for short-term greed. Consumption of the interest is appropriate; consumption of the principal, when avoidable, is an act of greed that mortgages the future.

Rough seas cut our visit short, as the captain signaled that we needed to head back. Suddenly we succumbed to a sinking feeling. Images of protesting western gulls began to haunt us. To us their cries were like mournful wails of refugees forced to raise their offspring on top of bombed-out rubble.

The wind had increased, and the afternoon seas grew rougher, but the sun had broken through the clouds, and soon we could see the San Francisco skyline. Somehow the distance seemed shorter than it had this morning—we had been reminded that the environment is never beyond the reach of human impact. ■

*Sara Wan is a long-time coastal advocate who currently chairs the Coastal Commission and is a member of the Coastal Conservancy. She has master's degrees in biology and electrical engineering, and is an avid birder and wildlife observer.*



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**Above: The Billy Pugh in action  
Below: Since 1996, six fur seal  
pups have been born on the  
islands.**



POINT REYES BIRD OBSERVATORY